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XXV. ACCOUNT

OF PAWPAW OR COWRY SHELLS, FOUND IN DORCHESTER.

In a letter to the Hon. John Davis, Esq.

BY Rev. THADDEUS MASON HARRIS, F. A. A.

Dorchester, October 22, 1806.

DEAR SIR,

AGREEABLY to your request I make the following statement, which you may communicate to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, if you think worthy of their notice.

In the summer of 1802 I procured several loads of mud from a kind of pond-hole in Dorchester for the purpose of making a compost manure for my garden. As it lay in a heap in the barn yard, I found my children busily employed in picking from it the small shells called *pawpaws*, or more properly *cowries*; and, in raking open the pile, they gathered, I believe, more than a quart. As the pile was levelled, many more were collected; and we are daily finding them on the ground, where it was spread. My curiosity was much excited by the circumstance; especially as I had never met with the *cyprea moneta* on our shores, and did not know that it had been discovered on the coast. Accordingly I visited the place, whence the mud was taken, and found it full of water in consequence of a heavy shower of rain; and indeed it is rarely quite dry; but on the bank there were many more shells of the same kind in the mud, that had been thrown out. Upon examination it appeared, that this was once the head of a creek, and, within the recollection of an aged man in the neighbourhood, was filled every high tide. About two rods below the pond, and on the border of what was formerly salt marsh, is a road, which

was laid out at the first settlement of the town. Sixty years ago, my informant used to stand on the bridge over the creek, and catch alewives. The bridge has for many years been taken away, and the road made solid ; so that the tide is quite excluded. The marsh itself has been in part converted into tillage ground, by a dam about one third of a mile lower down. The creek, in its windings below the dam, must be more than a mile in length, and has its mouth at the flats, which separate Dorchester from Boston. When open all the way, it was only wide enough to admit a small boat to its head.

I feel a hesitancy in pronouncing, that the shells were natives of the pond ; and yet it is past conjecture how they should have been brought there. It cannot however be amiss to record the fact, which I have stated.

The name *pawpaw*, I believe, is given to the shell, only when the convex part is broken or ground flat, that it may be used by the negroes among us in a game, which perhaps is original to their own country. In Africa and the East Indies, where it passes for money, it is called *the cowry*. Large quantities of these shells are said to be collected annually in the Maldiva Islands, for exportation to Africa, Bengal, Siam, &c. for the purposes of commerce.

With much respect, I am, dear sir,

your friend and humble servant,

THADDEUS MASON HARRIS.